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# **American Community Survey Design and Methodology (January 2014)**

## **Chapter 9: Language Assistance Program**



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## **Chapter 9: Language Assistance Program**

### **9.1 Overview**

The language assistance program for the American Community Survey (ACS) includes a set of methods and procedures designed to assist sample households with limited English proficiency in completing the ACS interview. The ACS program provides language assistance in many forms, including translated instruments and other survey materials, bilingual interviewers, and multiple language support by telephone. Providing language assistance is one of many ways that the ACS can improve survey quality by reducing levels of survey nonresponse, the potential for nonresponse bias, and the introduction of response errors. Language support can help individuals with limited English skills to understand the survey questions, their rights as respondents, and the importance of the ACS.

The ACS language assistance program includes the use of several tools to support each mode of data collection—mail, Internet, telephone, and personal visit. Staff developed these tools based on research that assessed the current performance of the ACS for non-English speakers. McGovern (2004) found that, despite the limited availability of mail questionnaires in languages other than English, the ACS successfully interviewed non-English speakers by telephone and personal visit follow-up. She also found that the level of item nonresponse for households speaking languages other than English was consistent with the low levels of item nonresponse in English-speaking households. These results led to a focus on improving the quality of data collected in the telephone and personal visit data collection modes. The language program includes assistance in many languages during the telephone and personal visit nonresponse follow-up stages, as well as some assistance in other languages during the mail and Internet phases.

This chapter provides detail on the current language assistance program. It begins with an overview of the language support, translation, and pretesting guidelines. It then discusses methods for each of the four data collection modes. The chapter closes with a discussion of associated research and evaluation activities.

### **9.2 Background**

The 2010 Decennial Census Program placed a priority on developing and testing tools to improve the quality of data collected from people with limited English proficiency; in fact, staff involved in the ACS and the 2010 Census worked jointly to study language barriers and effective methods for data collection. People with limited English skills represent a growing share of the total population. The 2011 ACS found that 60.6 million people (20.8 percent of the population five years and over) spoke a language other than English at home with about 41.8 percent speaking English less than “very well.” The population five years and older speaking a language other than English at home in 2011 represents a 158.2 percent increase since 1980. (Ryan, 2013).

### 9.3 Guidelines

The U.S. Census Bureau does not require the translation of all survey instruments or materials. Each census and survey determines the appropriate set of translated materials and language assistance options needed to ensure high quality survey results. The Census Bureau does require that surveys and censuses follow specific guidelines when they translate data collection instruments, respondent letters, and other respondent materials.

In 2004, the Census Bureau released guidelines for language support translation and pretesting. These state that data collection instruments translated from a source language into a target language should be reliable, complete, accurate, and culturally appropriate. Reliable translations convey the intended meaning of the original text. Complete translations should neither add new information nor omit information already provided in the source document. An accurate translation is free of both grammatical and spelling errors. Cultural appropriateness considers the culture of the target population when developing the text for translation. In addition to meeting these criteria, translated Census Bureau data collection instruments and related materials should have semantic, conceptual, and normative equivalence. The Census Bureau guidelines recommend the use of a translation team approach to ensure equivalence. The language support guidelines include recommended practices for preparing, translating, and revising materials, and for ensuring sound documentation (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). The ACS utilizes these Census Bureau guidelines in the preparation of data collection instruments, advance letters, and other respondent communications.

### 9.4 Mail and Internet Data Collection

Beginning in January 2013, the ACS added an Internet option to complete the survey online. The mailing requesting response by Internet and the Internet instrument are available in both English and Spanish. The Census Bureau currently mails ACS questionnaires to each nonresponding address in a single language. In the United States, households receive English language forms, while in Puerto Rico, they receive Spanish forms. The cover of the English and Spanish questionnaires contain a message written in the other language requesting that people who prefer to complete the survey in that language call a toll-free assistance number to obtain assistance or to request the appropriate form. In 2012, the Census Bureau received requests for Spanish questionnaires from less than 0.01 percent of the mailout sample, approximately 200 forms requests per panel (Fish, 2013). In 2011, the Census Bureau added to the pre-notice letter a multi-lingual brochure tested in 2009 and providing information in English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese (Joshi-pura, 2010). In 2012, the Census Bureau began making available Chinese and Korean language assistance guides when requested by the respondent. Language assistance guides include a full translation of the questionnaire for use as reference by both respondents and interviewers.

The ACS provides telephone questionnaire assistance in English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, and Vietnamese. A call to the toll-free Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, and

Vietnamese help numbers reaches an in-language speaker directly. The interviewer will either provide general assistance or conduct the interview. Interviewers are encouraged to convince callers to complete the interview over the phone.

## **9.5 Telephone and Personal Visit Follow-Up**

The call centers and regional offices that conduct the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) nonresponse follow-up operations make every effort to hire bilingual staff. Fish (2010a) and Fish (2010b) estimate the language needs in the 2006 - 2008 ACS CAPI and CATI operations. She found that the language workloads in the regional offices were stable over time and that the regional offices successfully met the language needs of the population in their regions by hiring field representatives with necessary language skills. She also found that the call centers successfully support at least 10 of the top 14 critical language needs encountered during CATI.

The regional offices train CAPI interviewers to search for interpreters within the sample household, or from the neighborhood, to assist in data collection. The regional offices maintain a list of interpreters who are skilled in many languages and are available to assist the CAPI interviewer in the language preferred by a household respondent. Interviewers use a flashcard to identify the specific language spoken when they cannot communicate with a particular household. CAPI interviewers can also provide respondents that speak Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Vietnamese, Polish, Portuguese, French, Haitian-Creole, or Arabic translated versions of some informational materials. These materials include an introductory letter and two brochures that explain the survey, as well as a letter that thanks the respondent for his or her participation.

The ACS CATI and CAPI survey instruments currently are available in both English and Spanish. Interviewers can conduct interviews in additional languages if they have that capability. Because a translated instrument is not available in languages other than English and Spanish, interviewers translate the English version during the interview and record the results on the English instrument. The Census Bureau has created language assistance guides in Chinese and Korean for interviewers to use while interviewing. These language assistance guides contain the preferred translation in Chinese and Vietnamese. The ACS developed special procedures and an interviewer training module dealing with the collection of data from respondents who do not speak English. The standard classroom interviewer training for all ACS interviewers includes this language assistance training. The training is designed to improve the consistency of these procedures and to remind interviewers of the importance of collecting complete data for all households.

Bilingual interviews currently provide support in more than 30 languages. Interviewer language capabilities include English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian, French, Polish, Korean, Vietnamese, German, Japanese, Arabic, Haitian Creole, Italian, Navajo, Tagalog, Greek, and Urdu.

The CATI and CAPI instruments collect important data on language-related issues, including the frequency of the use of interpreters and of the Spanish instrument, which allows the Census Bureau to monitor how interviewers complete survey interviews. The instruments record how often interviewers conduct translations of their own into different languages. For example, Griffin (2006b) found that in 2005, more than 86 percent of all CAPI interviews with Spanish-speaking households were conducted by a bilingual (Spanish/English) interviewer. She also found that about eight percent of the interviews conducted with Chinese-speaking households required the assistance of an interpreter who was not a member of the household.

Additional data collected allow managers to identify CATI and CAPI cases that the call centers and the regional offices did not complete due to language barriers. A profile of this information by language highlights those languages needing greater support. For example, Fish (2010a) found that over the period 2006 to 2008, some regional offices' total language CAPI workloads experienced moderate changes, while others' total language workloads remained stable. These changes were driven mostly by an increase or decrease in the regional offices' English and/or Spanish language workloads. This research also demonstrated that estimated language workloads and the estimated linguistically isolated language workloads aligned well with the available language assistance resources. Regional offices have hired field representatives with the necessary language skills to accommodate their unique linguistically isolated language workloads.

## **9.6 Group Quarters**

Chapter 8 describes the data collection methodology for people living in group quarters (GQ) facilities. Two instruments are used in GQ data collection—a paper survey questionnaire for interviewing GQ residents, and an automated instrument for collecting administrative information from each facility. The Census Bureau designed and field-tested a bilingual (English/Spanish) GQ questionnaire in 2005. Interviewers used these questionnaires to conduct interviews with a small sample of GQ residents. An interviewer debriefing found that the interviewers had no problems with these questionnaires and, as a result, the GQ data collection currently uses this form. The Census Bureau will hire bilingual interviewers to conduct interviews with non-English speakers in Puerto Rican GQ facilities. The Group Quarters Facility Questionnaire is available in both English and Spanish.

## **9.7 Research and Evaluation**

Due to limited resources, the ACS established early research and development priorities for the language assistance program. Of critical importance was a benchmarking of the effectiveness of current methods. McGovern (2004) and Griffin and Broadwater (2005) assessed the potential for nonresponse bias due to language barriers. In addition, ACS staff created a Web site on quality measures, including annual information about the effect of language barriers on survey nonresponse. These evaluations and the Web site both show that current methods result in very low levels of noninterviews caused by the interviewer's inability to speak the respondent's

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language. These nonresponse levels remain low because of special efforts in the field to use interpreters and other means to conduct these interviews. McGovern (2004) also assessed item level nonresponse. She found that the mail returns received from non-English speakers were nearly as complete as those from English speakers and that the interviews conducted by telephone and personal visit with non-English speakers were as complete as those from English speakers. The Census Bureau continues to monitor unit nonresponse due to language barriers.

Language barriers can result in measurement errors when respondents do not understand the questions, or when interviewers incorrectly translate a survey question. Staff developed and tested translated language guides for use by respondents and telephone and personal visit interviewers who conduct interviews in Korean and Chinese to reduce the potential for translation errors. The Census Bureau has completed a complete assessment of the Spanish instrument to improve the quality of data collected from Spanish-speaking households.

To improve response in languages other than English and Spanish, the ACS tested inserting a multi-lingual brochure into the mailings. That brochure includes translations of key messages, encouraging respondents to call a toll-free number for assistance. As noted earlier, the ACS added this brochure in 2011. For details of this testing, see Joshipura (2010.) ACS managers plan research and development of additional language assistance materials for the mail and Internet modes. Increasing levels of participation by mail and Internet can reduce survey costs and improve the quality of final ACS data.

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